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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR URGES GOVERNMENT TO RETURN JOURNALIST'S PASSPORT

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia Butenis, reason para 1.4 d.

¶1. (C) Summary. The Ambassador is pressing senior government officials to allow journalist Tasneem Khalil and family to travel to mitigate the negative international reaction to his case. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Early May 11, security officials (apparently from the military intelligence organization DGFI) arrested Tasneem Khalil, a journalist with the Daily Star newspaper who has done freelance work for CNN and Human Rights Watch. After consulting with Daily Star editor Mahfuz Anam and others, the Ambassador called Fahim Munaim, press secretary to Chief Adviser Ahmed and a former Daily Star editor, to express our concerns about his arrest and especially indications that Khalil was being scrutinized in part because of his contacts with western embassies. We were also in direct and indirect contact with DGFI to signal our interest and press for proper treatment for Khalil.

¶3. (C) Khalil was released late May 11 after Anam agreed to issue a statement saying that Khalil's detention had nothing to do with his journalism but with Khalil's blog and two anti-military text messages from his cell phone. Khalil, although invited, did not attend the previously scheduled May 13 reception hosted by the Ambassador in honor of journalists as part of her farewell activities; in remarks delivered at the reception and reported in the next day's press, the Ambassador noted, as part of her defense of a vigorous, free press, the chilling affect of arbitrary detention and our hope that such instances involving journalists would remain the exception and not become the rule.

¶4. (C) On May 14, Anam (protect) told the Ambassador that, contrary to initial reports, Khalil had been beaten in custody and now, fearing for his life, wanted to travel abroad with his wife and six-month-old daughter. On May 15, two Dhaka-based expatriates who do consulting work for Human Rights Watch confirmed to us that Khalil and family are in hiding in a safe location but want to leave Bangladesh as soon as possible. They asked that the USG pressure the government to return the passports of Khalil and his wife to allow them to travel. The Ambassador, in a subsequent phone call with press secretary Munaim, urged the government to release the passports and allow Khalil to travel.

¶5. (C) On May 16, on the margins of the visit to Dhaka of USARPAC General Brown, the Ambassador raised Khalil's situation with Chief of Army Staff Moeen. She noted his detention generated great concern in the USG, stressed the importance of treating Khalil fairly and lawfully, our particular concern if Khalil were being penalized for engaging with U.S. and other diplomats, that what the government views as sedition may be seen by many others as free speech, and that allowing Khalil and family to travel

abroad might serve the government's long-term interests.

¶6. (C) Moeen replied that Khalil was not being investigated because of his diplomatic contacts but for criminal acts such as sending money abroad through irregular channels, which he called "money laundering," and sending a film he made to the U.S. containing seditious allegations about Bangladesh. He indicated formal charges are being prepared against Khalil, but when pressed by the Ambassador, agreed to revisit the issue.

¶7. (C) Comment: We will continue to raise this case with senior government officials, including a top DGFI official on May 17 and we expect with the Foreign Affairs Adviser next week.

BUTENIS